

Article

Fragile Interfaces: Electronic Literature and the Poetics of Vulnerability

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of fragile interfaces to examine how electronic literature makes visible the socio-technical infrastructures that shape digital subjectivity. Situated at the intersection of Digital Humanities, media theory, and literary studies, the study addresses a gap in current scholarship by arguing that vulnerability in digital works is not only represented thematically but also embedded in their formal and material conditions. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles's notion of the text-interface and Judith Butler's relational understanding of vulnerability, the article analyzes Alex Saum's "Room #3" (2020) and J.R. Carpenter's "Entre Ville" (2006). Through two distinct interface logics (platform simulation and hypertextual urban mapping), these works foreground fragmentation, exposure, and infrastructural dependency. The analysis adopts a qualitative interpretative approach grounded in close reading and rhetorical analysis of digital textual environments, emphasizing the role of interface design, navigational structures, and multimodal composition in the production of meaning. It reveals how digital interfaces structure vulnerability by shaping forms of perception, agency, and relationality, producing fragmented and technologically mediated subjectivities. In this sense, vulnerability emerges not only as thematic content but as a condition enacted through the unstable architectures of digital textuality. By conceptualizing fragility across material, structural, affective, political, and ecological dimensions, this article contributes to ongoing debates in Digital Humanities concerning mediation, platform society, and digital precarity in contemporary cultural production.

Keywords: Electronic Literature; Digital Interfaces; Vulnerability; Posthuman Subjectivity; Digital Precarity

1. Introduction

In contemporary digital culture, interfaces have become the primary sites through which experience is mediated, structured, and recorded. Screens, platforms, windows, and navigational architectures organize not only communication but also perception, attention, and subjectivity within what has been described as a platform society [1–3]. At the same time, the interface can be understood as a cultural form that structures digital experience at the level of representation and interaction [4]. Within this environment, electronic literature offers a privileged space for examining how meaning emerges through interface-based interaction, a perspective that has become central to recent discussions in Digital Humanities [5,6]. If literature has traditionally been associated with the stability of the printed page, electronic works foreground the interface as both material condition and semantic structure. In doing so, they expose its fragility.

This article argues that electronic literature constructs what may be described as fragile interfaces: digital textual environments in which vulnerability is not merely represented thematically but embedded within the technical, formal, and experiential architecture of the work. Fragility operates at multiple levels (structural, material,

affective, and political) revealing how digital mediation reshapes literary subjectivity and relationality.

The emergence of electronic literature (E-lit) marks a significant transformation in the conception of the literary object. Unlike print texts, electronic works depend on computational processes and digital infrastructures that integrate language, image, sound, animation, and interactivity. As N. Katherine Hayles suggests [7], electronic literature does not replace print but redefines textuality through its convergence with digital media. This transformation entails more than a shift of support from page to screen: it entails a reconfiguration of textual ontology. The digital text does not exist as a fixed object but as a process enacted through interface, navigation, and execution of code. The interface thus becomes a central component in the production of meaning. Media theorists have long emphasized that cultural production is inseparable from its technical supports; as Friedrich Kittler argues [8], media determine the conditions under which communication and representation become possible. Accordingly, the digital text emerges not as an abstract literary artifact but as a materially and technically conditioned process. More recent approaches to digital ontology further emphasize this entanglement between technology and cultural production [4].

Within this framework, the concept of the text interface becomes crucial. Digital literary works function as environments in which interface design, navigational logic, and multimodal composition shape both interpretation and affective engagement. The interface mediates between computational operations and embodied perception, generating a space where reading becomes interaction and exposure. Such exposure invites a dialogue with theories of vulnerability. Judith Butler conceptualizes vulnerability as a relational condition of exposure and interdependence, not merely as weakness but as the constitutive openness of embodied life [9]. In digital environments, however, exposure acquires new dimensions: subjectivity is mediated by platforms, algorithms, and infrastructures that simultaneously enable connection and intensify surveillance. Electronic literature makes this condition perceptible by incorporating instability, fragmentation, repetition, and technological dependence into its formal design.

At the same time, posthumanist perspectives—particularly Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory—help illuminate how digital textuality destabilizes the autonomous humanist subject [10]. In electronic literature, both author and reader operate within hybrid assemblages of bodies and machines. Subjectivity emerges as distributed and technologically mediated, sustained by fragile systems whose operation remains partially opaque.

Drawing on these theoretical frameworks, this article examines two works of electronic literature: *Room #3* (2020) by Alex Saum and *Entre Ville* (2006) by J.R. Carpenter. Although situated in different historical contexts, both works exemplify a poetics of vulnerability structured through interface fragility. Through looping videoconference simulations and multisensory urban mapping, respectively, they transform the interface into a site of exposure, relational tension, and precarious mediation.

By foregrounding the fragility of digital textual environments, this study contributes to ongoing debates in electronic literature and Digital Humanities. It proposes that vulnerability be understood not only as thematic content but as a material and formal condition intrinsic to interface-based literary production. In this sense, electronic literature does not simply depict contemporary fragility; it stages it through the unstable architectures that sustain its existence. To examine this claim, the article addresses the following research questions: How do digital interfaces in contemporary electronic literature structure vulnerability not only as thematic representation but as formal and material condition? In what ways do platform logics and hypertextual architectures reshape literary subjectivity and relationality? How can the concept of fragile interfaces contribute to broader debates within Digital Humanities about mediation, infrastructure, and digital precarity?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Electronic Literature and the Text-Interface

Electronic literature (E-lit) designates a field of literary production whose aesthetic and formal properties emerge from computational environments [7, 11]. In this article, the term is used following Hayles and Rettberg to refer to works that are born-digital and dependent on computational environments. While the term digital literature is sometimes used more broadly to encompass a wider range of digitized or digital-born texts, this study adopts electronic literature to emphasize the specificity of works that are inseparable from their technological and interface-based conditions. Unlike print texts, electronic works cannot be fully transferred to paper without losing their specificity: their existence depends on digital inscription, executable code, and interface-based interaction.

As Morales Sánchez observes, “digital literature expands the horizons of the *lettera* -the etymological basis of the literary—toward visual, sonic, and technical codes, enabling experimentation that is not only linguistic but also computational and machinic” (p. 10, my translation) [12]. In this sense, electronic literature integrates verbal, visual, and algorithmic systems into a single aesthetic configuration. This convergence of poetic language and computational logic has been central to digital poetics since its early theorization [13].

N. Katherine Hayles proposes understanding the digital text not as a fixed object but as a dynamic process emerging from the interaction between reader and machine [7]. Her concept of the text-interface underscores the idea that digital textuality is inseparable from the interface that mediates access to it. In fact, she argues that “reading in this view becomes a complex performance in which agency is distributed between the user, the interface, and the active cognitions of the networked and programmable machine” (p. 153). Navigation structures, hyperlink architectures, temporal execution of code, multimodal design, and user interaction all condition the production of meaning. The interface functions as a zone of translation between computational processes and human perception, a dynamic that has also been explored in recent discussions of algorithmic culture and its role in structuring meaning and interaction [14]. The digital text thus exists not as a stable artifact but as an enacted event. From this perspective, electronic literature constitutes a multimodal system of forces in which word, image, sound, animation, and interactivity converge. Crucially, the interface is not a neutral container but a semantic structure: it organizes perception, shapes temporality, and frames the possibilities of readerly agency. As Johanna Drucker argues [15], graphical and visual forms are themselves sites of knowledge production, actively shaping how information is interpreted and experienced. Meaning does not reside solely in linguistic content but in the interplay between interface design, technical execution, and embodied engagement.

Because digital texts operate as executable processes rather than fixed objects, their ontological stability is inherently provisional. They depend on browsers, operating systems, software compatibility, hosting servers, and technological infrastructures that are themselves subject to obsolescence and failure. Electronic literature is therefore structurally fragile: its survival depends on technical continuity and infrastructural maintenance. The interface, while appearing seamless and immaterial, is supported by unstable technological systems whose operation remains partially opaque to users, confirming that interfaces are not neutral surfaces but ideological and operational effects of computational systems [16]. This infrastructural dependency introduces a material dimension of precarity that becomes central to understanding digital textuality.

2.2. Posthuman Subjectivity and Hybrid Agency

Electronic literature also invites reconsideration of subjectivity through posthumanist frameworks. Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory provides a foundational reference point for understanding hybrid agency in technologically mediated environments [10]. The cyborg, as Haraway defines it, “is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (p. 65). This figure destabilizes binary oppositions such as human/machine and natural/artificial, challenging the modern conception of the autonomous and self-sufficient subject.

In the context of electronic literature, both author and reader operate within hybrid assemblages of bodies, interfaces, and computational systems. The act of reading becomes technologically extended: perception is mediated by screens, gestures are translated into digital commands, and affective responses are shaped by algorithmic structures. Subjectivity emerges as distributed and relational rather than sovereign [10,17]. As Haraway notes, in this high-tech culture, “it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine” (p. 97), since the machine is not an external object but “an aspect of our embodiment” (p. 99) [10]. This decentering of the autonomous human subject aligns with what Cary Wolfe describes as posthumanism’s challenge to anthropocentric models of agency and meaning-making [17]. Such hybridization intensifies the fragility of the subject. If the humanist model imagined the subject as stable and autonomous, posthuman mediation reveals its dependence on technical infrastructures and machinic processes. As Rosi Braidotti argues, the posthuman subject emerges as relational, embedded, and technologically mediated rather than self-contained and sovereign [18]. The interface becomes a site where subjectivity is negotiated, exposed, and sometimes fragmented.

2.3. Vulnerability as Relational and Aesthetic Condition

Judith Butler conceptualizes vulnerability as a relational condition of exposure and dependency [9]. Rather than equating vulnerability with weakness, Butler understands it as the constitutive openness of embodied life to others and to social structures. As she notes, “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (p. 20) [9]. To be vulnerable is to be exposed—to injury, to recognition, to transformation. Vulnerability is therefore both ethical and political. Contemporary feminist philosophy has further emphasized that vulnerability is not merely a deficit or passive condition but a generative dimension of relational existence [19]. In digital environments, however, exposure acquires new dimensions. Platform-mediated interaction intensifies visibility, data capture, and surveillance, while simultaneously enabling new forms of relationality. Electronic literature reflects and reconfigures these dynamics by staging exposure not only at the level of narrative content but through formal and technical structures that position the reader within systems of mediation and observation.

If vulnerability names a condition of relational exposure intensified by digital mediation, it must also be examined at the level of literary form. Thus, vulnerability—understood both as a relational condition [9] and as a dimension reshaped by technological environments—can be traced not only in the thematization of fragility but in the very modes of writing and aesthetic organization. In this respect, Jean-Michel Ganteau’s notion of the vulnerable text [20], further elaborated by Ganteau and Susana Onega [21], proves particularly relevant. This category conceives literature as a space in which wounds and the limits of experience are inscribed not merely as narrative content but as aesthetic structures that affect the organization and status of literary discourse itself. A vulnerable text does not simply depict fragility as a thematic motif; rather, it incorporates the wound into its formal architecture, allowing opacity, silence, and indecision to emerge as central elements of its aesthetic functioning. Such works interrogate the notions of unity, closed sequence, and full coherence, adopting instead open, discontinuous, and fragile structures. The narrative voice may fragment, split, or become uncertain; narrative temporality may disperse and lose its linear progression; language itself may dissolve, repeat, or approach the inarticulate.

At the same time, the figure of the vulnerable hero or protagonist departs from the model of the strong and autonomous subject [22]. This is not a character who controls events or restores order, but one who assumes exposure to harm as part of a shared experience. Identity appears marked by the fracture of trauma, and agency acquires a different meaning: it does not rest on mastery or the definitive overcoming of injury, but on the capacity to sustain the wound in relation to others.

From this perspective, electronic literature emerges as a particularly fertile terrain for the appearance of such vulnerable texts. The material instability of interfaces, hypertextual fragmentation, and multisensory overload intensify the fragility of writing and invite the reader into an ethical experience that recognizes precarity as intrinsic to the literary gesture and to the condition of its protagonists. In digital works, however, this aesthetic vulnerability does not remain confined to narrative structure; it becomes inseparable from the technological architectures that enable and constrain the work’s existence.

2.4. Fragile Interfaces: Dimensions of Vulnerability in Interface-Based Digital Mediation

Bringing these strands together, the concept of fragile interfaces names the convergence of relational vulnerability, posthuman mediation, and infrastructural precarity within digital literary environments. Fragility here operates on multiple levels.

While the terms vulnerability, precarity, and fragility are closely related, they are not used interchangeably in this study. Vulnerability, following Butler, refers to a constitutive condition of relational exposure and dependency [9]. Precarity designates the uneven political and socio-economic distribution of vulnerability under specific regimes of power. Fragility, as proposed here, names the formal, material, and experiential instability of digital textual environments. The concept of fragile interfaces thus articulates these dimensions without collapsing them, allowing vulnerability and precarity to be understood through their inscription in technological form.

First, there is material fragility: digital works depend on technological infrastructures prone to malfunction, obsolescence, and disappearance. Unlike print texts, whose material support can endure for centuries, electronic literature is embedded within rapidly evolving technical ecosystems, as emphasized in recent studies of digital media infrastructures and their political and material dimensions [23,24]. As Susan Leigh Star observes, infrastructures

tend to remain invisible until they break down, at which point their material and operational complexity becomes perceptible [16]. Electronic literature is therefore structurally fragile: its survival depends on technical continuity and infrastructural maintenance. The interface, while appearing seamless and immaterial, is supported by unstable technological systems whose operation remains partially opaque to users. This infrastructural dependency introduces a material dimension of precarity that becomes central to understanding digital textuality.

Second, there is structural fragility: interface-based navigation often produces fragmentation, discontinuity, repetition, and open-endedness. Narrative progression may be interrupted by loops, dead links, or suspended scenes. Meaning remains contingent upon interaction and readerly engagement. Unlike linear print narratives, digital literary environments frequently resist closure and coherence, foregrounding instability as an aesthetic principle.

Third, there is affective fragility: digital mediation intensifies experiences of exposure, isolation, and surveillance. The interface may simulate a connection while foregrounding absence or delay. Interaction can produce proximity without reciprocity, intimacy without presence. Such affective tensions situate both character and reader within environments marked by uncertainty and relational vulnerability.

Finally, there is political fragility: digital platforms operate within regimes of data extraction, algorithmic governance, and infrastructural control. Electronic literature that reuses or subverts such interfaces reveals the precarious entanglement between subjectivity and technological systems. The interface becomes not merely a site of aesthetic experimentation but a space where power, visibility, and mediation are negotiated.

A fifth dimension, ecological fragility, can also be considered. Digital literary environments are embedded within material infrastructures—servers, energy consumption, and hardware production—that entail environmental costs and dependencies. Fragility thus extends beyond technological systems and human relations to include environmental interdependence, foregrounding the entanglement of digital culture with ecological conditions.

By conceptualizing electronic literature through fragile interfaces, vulnerability can be understood not only as thematic content but as a condition embedded within the technical and formal architecture of digital textuality. Electronic literature does not simply narrate fragility; it performs it through the unstable structures that sustain its existence.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative approach grounded in close reading and rhetorical analysis of the digital literary form. Rather than treating electronic works as static artifacts, the analysis understands them as multimodal environments whose meaning emerges through interaction between text, interface, and reader.

The methodological framework combines three complementary perspectives. First, an interpretative dimension informed by hermeneutic principles conceives meaning as co-constituted by author, reader, text, and context. Drawing on Albadalejo's notion of *poliacrosis*, interpretation is understood as plural and situated: literary discourse unfolds within heterogeneous interpretative communities, including the critical reader, whose perspectives are shaped by ideological and contextual positioning [25].

Second, the analysis incorporates the rhetorical framework proposed by Morales Sánchez, adapted to digital textuality [12]. This framework considers three interrelated dimensions: (a) *inventio*, referring to the ideas and thematic problematics underpinning each work; (b) *dispositio*, addressing the organization and spatial distribution of elements within the digital environment, including the genres activated by the interface; and (c) *elocutio*, examining the material realization of the text through verbal, visual, sonic, and algorithmic languages. From this perspective, electronic literature is approached as an aesthetically designed configuration in which form, content, and technological mediation are inseparable.

Third, the rhetorical analysis is articulated with posthumanist and interface-based perspectives. Particular attention is paid to digital materiality as a meaningful form, to the interface as a structuring device that shapes readerly experience, and to the ways in which fragmentation, repetition, and navigational logic inscribe vulnerability within the architecture of the work. This approach allows fragility to be examined not only as thematic content but as a structural and technical condition embedded within digital textual environments.

The corpus selection is guided by comparative and conceptual criteria. *Room #3* [26] by Alex Saum and *Entre Ville* [27] by J.R. Carpenter were chosen because they represent distinct historical moments in the development of electronic literature and deploy markedly different interface logics: platform simulation and corporate aesthetics

in the former, hypertextual urban mapping and multisensory poetics in the latter. Despite these differences, both works foreground interface-mediated exposure and structural instability, making them particularly suitable for examining the concept of fragile interfaces across temporal and formal variations. The analysis begins with Saum’s Room #3 in order to foreground the intensification of platform-mediated subjectivity in contemporary digital culture, and subsequently turns to Carpenter’s *Entre Ville* to trace earlier configurations of interface-based vulnerability. This ordering follows a conceptual rather than chronological logic, moving from present platform conditions toward their genealogical antecedents in earlier forms of electronic literature.

4. Room #3

Alex Saum’s *Room #3* (2020), created in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, formed part of an international electronic literature exhibition dedicated to exploring confinement and digital hyperconnectivity. The work can be situated within what has been described as third-generation electronic literature, characterized by platform-based environments and web-native aesthetics [28]. As a poet and scholar of contemporary literature and new media, Saum situates this work within what may be described as corporate fiction—a critical digital genre that appropriates and reconfigures the visual and procedural languages of corporate platforms such as Zoom, Google Forms, and chatbot interfaces. By adopting these familiar structures, the work exposes the mechanisms of algorithmic capture and subjectivity management embedded within everyday digital environments.

The piece simulates participation in a Zoom videoconference during pandemic isolation. Structured in the first person, the narrative presents “Alex,” alone at home, seeking connection through technological mediation. From the outset, a constitutive paradox is established: the promise of permanent connectivity coexists with experiences of solitude, fragmentation, and latent surveillance. The interface does not merely frame this tension; it produces it.

The reader’s experience begins with a sequence of white screens containing short statements: “Because you are alone in your house and no one is allowed over,” “That’s how it feels,” “But don’t worry” [26]. The simplicity of these screens mimics the minimalism of corporate user interfaces, where reassurance is delivered through brevity and clarity. Yet the phrasing already suggests vulnerability as exposure: the second-person address implicates the reader within the scenario of isolation. The interface thus functions as both narrative surface and affective device.

The text then offers a solution: “You are never alone. Enter Room #3. You are about to waste 5 minutes of your life.” The invitation carries a double movement. On the one hand, it promises connection; on the other, it pre-emptively neutralizes value (“waste 5 minutes”), echoing the logic of platform temporality in which time is simultaneously commodified and trivialized. Clicking the link leads to a simulated Zoom room in which multiple versions of Alex appear -first one, then two, then four- occupying identical frames (**Figure 1**). These figures interact dysfunctionally: microphones remain muted, cameras freeze, gestures fail to synchronize. The scene unfolds in a continuous loop.



Figure 1. Multiplication of the self within the simulated Zoom interface in Room #3 [23].

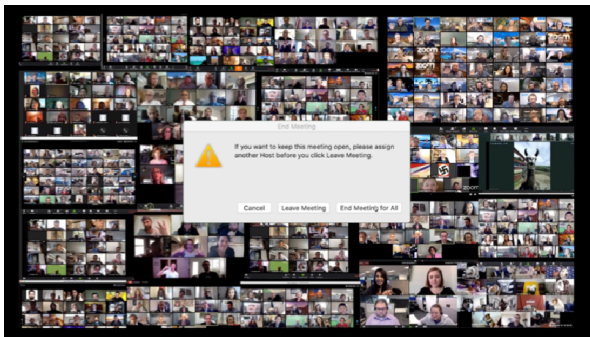
Source: Screenshot by author. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2yFid4-FWc>.

This looping structure is not simply a narrative device but a formal manifestation of fragile interface logic. Temporality becomes suspended rather than progressive; repetition replaces development, enacting what Chun identifies as the habitual temporality of networked media [29]. The multiplication of the self visually stages posthuman fragmentation: subjectivity appears distributed across screens, each version performing a partial, incomplete presence. Agency is diminished; communication becomes ritualized. In Hayles’s terms, the Zoom interface operates as a text interface whose architecture conditions meaning [7]. It scripts delay, interruption, and technical failure as aesthetic elements. The interface itself becomes unstable—not through malfunction, but through excessive repetition.

After this initial sequence, the reader encounters black screens displaying reassuring messages: “See? No need to feel alone”. “You can always hang out with them in a never ending loop”. “Just turn your computer on, this room is always open” [26]. The tonal shift from white to black screens introduces a subtle affective dissonance. The language mirrors the rhetoric of platform capitalism—availability, permanence, personalization [30]—yet the promise of endless connection is explicitly tied to the loop. Infinite accessibility coincides with temporal stagnation. The interface offers continuity while withholding reciprocity.

The work then transitions to another Zoom room in which Alex appears alone before her computer: she drinks coffee, adjusts her glasses, types, and gestures silently. There is no dialogue and no narrative advancement. Instead, the interface produces what may be described as an aesthetics of waiting. The reader is positioned ambiguously—observer, participant, potential intruder—without clear instructions for action. Interaction becomes suspended. Here, vulnerability manifests as exposure without response. The hyperconnected platform environment generates passivity rather than exchange, transforming intimacy into spectacle and situating the reader within a subtly voyeuristic position.

The final movement intensifies this logic. A link reading “You were never alone” leads to multiple Zoom rooms filled with users. A system message appears: “If you want to keep this meeting open, please assign another Host before you click Leave Meeting” [26], foregrounding the procedural logic through which platforms regulate participation (**Figure 2**). The interface speaks in administrative language, structuring authority and responsibility within the simulated meeting space. This regulatory mediation reflects the governance power of digital platforms in shaping visibility and interaction [31,32]. The subsequent white screen, “They are always watching”, radicalizes this logic by making surveillance explicit, recalling the disciplinary regimes of visibility through which subjects are rendered observable and governed, as described by Foucault [33].



(a)

They are always watching

(b)

Figure 2. Governance and surveillance in Room #3 [26]. (a) procedural system message regulating host authority; (b) final white screen articulating platform surveillance.

Source: Screenshots by author. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2yFid4-FWc>.

Across its architecture, Room #3 enacts vulnerability on intertwined levels. Technically, subjectivity is shown to depend on fragile digital infrastructures that mediate and fragment identity. Affectively, the promise of connection culminates in intensified isolation. Politically, the work situates both protagonist and reader within systems of algorithmic oversight and data capture. The interface does not merely represent fragility; it performs it through repetition, suspension, and infrastructural dependency.

Beyond its formal and political dimensions, Room #3 also articulates a figure of the vulnerable subject that resonates with Omega and Ganteau’s notion of the vulnerable hero [22]. Alex does not embody mastery or narrative agency; she neither restores communicative order nor transcends isolation. Instead, she remains suspended within technological mediation, exposed to visibility without reciprocity. Her multiplication across screens fragments identity rather than empowering it, while her silent gestures underscore a condition of relational dependency. This is not the autonomous subject of modern narrative, but a distributed and technologically mediated self whose agency is partial, contingent, and structurally precarious.

As a vulnerable text in Ganteau and Omega’s sense, Room #3 incorporates the wound into its formal structure [21]. Narrative coherence gives way to looping stasis; closure is replaced by suspension; communication is reduced to partial gestures. The interface itself becomes the site where fragility is staged. In this sense, Room #3 exemplifies fragile interfaces: digital environments in which vulnerability is materially embedded within technological architecture and readerly experience.

5. Entre Ville

J.R. Carpenter’s *Entre Ville* (2006) [27] is a work of electronic literature that explores everyday life in an urban neighborhood in Montreal, particularly along Saint-Urbain Street. Combining text, image, sound, and hypertextual navigation, the work produces a reading experience that exceeds the printed page. To traverse *Entre Ville* resembles walking through a neighborhood: pausing at minor details, lingering over ephemeral scenes, and gathering dispersed impressions. The work does not construct a unified narrative but invites exploratory dwelling within a mediated urban environment [34]. Generic categorization situates *Entre Ville* at the intersection of digital poetry and hypertextual narrative, with a strong visual and sonic dimension. As María Mencía notes, digital poetry expands poetic practice into multimodal and interactive environments, integrating verbal, visual, and sonic elements within computational frameworks [35]. In this sense, Carpenter’s work exemplifies a poetic form that exceeds the printed page. Its structure of access operates through a double gesture: a virtual notebook and a hand-drawn building façade functioning as an interactive interface (Figure 3). Together, these elements organize the reader’s movement through fragments distributed non-linearly. The notebook suggests intimacy and personal inscription, while the façade spatializes navigation, transforming domestic architecture into a hypertextual map. The interface itself becomes central to meaning production, foregrounding spatial navigation as a literary strategy.



Figure 3. Spatial interface design in *Entre Ville* [27]. Left: notebook entry interface. Right: interactive building façade functioning as navigational map.

Source: Screenshots by author. Available from: <http://luckyssoap.com/entreville/>.

The initial interface simulates a notebook—a space of intimacy and personal inscription—within which the poem *Saint-Urbain Street Heat* appears. This text serves as one of the principal entry points into the world of the work. The poem evokes the sensory atmosphere of urban summer: heat rising from asphalt, the smell of street food, background voices, bicycles passing, radios sounding behind windows. It does not narrate an event; rather, it captures an atmosphere—a lived and embodied spatial condition:

I

Altars of clutter,
hanging gardens of sound –
the back balconies buckle
under the weight of
high summer
Saint-Urbain Street heat.

(...)

VIII

Another morning of
outside still cooler than in.
Wood smoke from
Fairmount Bagels'
endless ovens
anoints the day.
Another scorcher.
Sesame seeds smile
in the sidewalk's
cracked teeth. [27]

The brevity and fragmentation of the poem reinforce the idea that the city is experienced through bodily impressions rather than through linear narration. Sensory accumulation replaces plot progression. The sidewalk's "cracked teeth" and the "altars of clutter" register vulnerability not as a dramatic rupture but as a material texture. The city appears as fragile surface; layered, inhabited, exposed.

The choice of the notebook as the initial interface is not incidental. By presenting the work as a collection of personal notes, Carpenter establishes a tone of intimacy and situated perception, as though the reader were consulting a field diary or poetic record. This interface positions the reader not before a closed narrative but within an assemblage of fragments awaiting exploration. The text interface thus produces vulnerability through openness: there is no authoritative narrative order, only partial and contingent access.

On another page of the notebook, a hand-drawn façade of an apartment building functions as an interactive map. Each window or door acts as a hyperlink leading to distinct content: photographs, collages, short texts, videos accompanied by ambient sound. Navigation becomes spatial rather than sequential, and the reader decides which window to open, in what order, and for how long to remain [36]. In Hayles's terms, the interface structures temporality and agency; it scripts reading as movement through architectural space [7].

The metaphor of the window is particularly significant. Windows simultaneously suggest intimacy and exposure: they permit looking inward while rendering the private visible. In *Entre Ville*, the interface literalizes this dynamic. To click on a window is to engage in an act of mediated observation. The reader becomes a neighbor, a passerby, perhaps even a voyeur. Fragility here resides not only in thematic content but in the relational configuration the interface establishes between observer and observed.

A further element is activated by clicking on the image of a dog (see **Figure 3**), leading to another poem, *Sniffing for Stories*. In this text, daily walks through an alleyway are narrated through the sensory experience of the animal,

where smell organizes spatial perception and converts each scent into a latent narrative trace:

Let's say our dog
walks us up and down this
alleyway three times a day.
(...)
We walk as if intent on
studying every scent.
(...)
We read
between these long lines of
peeling-paint fences spray-
painted with bright
abstractions and draped
with trailing vines. [27]

This perspectival shift destabilizes anthropocentric vision. The neighborhood is no longer primarily visual or human-centered but becomes an affective map composed of traces, residues, and olfactory inscriptions. In posthumanist terms, the work decenters the human subject, redistributing perception across species and material surfaces [18]. The city emerges not as ordered property or rationalized space but as relational ecology. The alleyway becomes readable only through multispecies entanglement. This perspective also resonates with Butler's notion of relational vulnerability [9]. Urban space is configured through exposure and interdependence, extending beyond human inhabitants to animals and material infrastructures. The dog's reading of scent parallels the reader's navigation of hyperlinks: both involve interpretive acts structured by embodied encounter. Vulnerability here is not weakness but openness—to traces, to others, to contingent presences. This multispecies perspective also foregrounds a dimension of ecological fragility, in which urban space is shaped by material conditions, sensory traces, and interdependent forms of life [24], highlighting how digital infrastructures participate in environmental sensing and the mediation of ecological relations. The interface thus mediates not only human experience but also the entanglement of technological, urban, and environmental processes.

Many windows in *Entre Ville* contain short videos accompanied by ambient sound: traffic murmurs, distant voices, the hum of a fan, birdsong. One notable example shows laundry moving in the wind on a balcony, accompanied by urban birds and street noise. Such elements intensify sensory immersion. Reading becomes an embodied experience of dwelling within mediated space. The digital interface does not merely display text; it orchestrates multimodal perception.

The interface, therefore, is not a neutral conduit for literary content but a semantic apparatus. The notebook, the façade, the clickable windows, and the embedded media constitute the architecture of meaning. The reader cannot access a complete narrative; on the contrary, experience remains partial and contingent upon navigational choices. In this sense, *Entre Ville* exemplifies fragile interfaces: environments whose openness and fragmentation resist narrative closure.

The work also stages vulnerability at thematic and structural levels. Thematically, it exposes domestic intimacy—worn armchairs, sleeping cats, laundry drying in the sun, silent balconies. Private life becomes visible within shared urban space. Formally, the narrative remains decentralized: there is no unifying plot or definitive conclusion. Instead, the reader encounters micro-scenes and fragments requiring assembly. This aligns with Ganteau's conception of the vulnerable text, where interruption, ambiguity, and structural openness constitute aesthetic principles [20].

Vulnerability further manifests in the material conditions of digital reading. Navigation depends on hyperlinks that may fail, videos that may buffer, and technological infrastructures that may become obsolete. The work's existence is inseparable from fragile digital systems. The interface demands active participation while simultaneously foregrounding its own contingency.

One of the most ethically charged effects of *Entre Ville* is its positioning of the reader as observer of mediated intimacy. Looking through digital windows raises a question: what does it mean to witness the everyday life of others through technological mediation? The work does not provide moral resolution. Instead, it exposes the reader to their own gaze. The mutual exposure of depicted lives and of the observing reader embodies relational vulnerability. Encountering the other becomes an act fraught with risk: to see is to be implicated.

In this context, vulnerability does not crystallize in a singular heroic figure but disperses across the urban ecology the work constructs. The inhabitants glimpsed through windows, the domestic interiors, and even the non-human perspectives—such as the dog’s olfactory navigation—collectively enact what Onega and Ganteau describe as the vulnerable hero: a subject marked not by mastery but by exposure, relational dependency, and fragility [22]. No character restores order or achieves narrative closure. Instead, subjectivity remains provisional, situated within porous boundaries between private and public, human and non-human, observer and observed. Vulnerability emerges here not as an individual trait but as a shared condition of urban coexistence mediated through digital architecture.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of Alex Saum’s *Room #3* and J.R. Carpenter’s *Entre Ville* confirms that electronic literature offers a particularly fertile space for articulating what this article has conceptualized as fragile interfaces. Across distinct historical contexts and aesthetic strategies, both works demonstrate that vulnerability in digital literary production operates simultaneously at thematic, formal, material, and experiential levels.

Through these analyses, five interrelated dimensions have structured the argument developed here. First, a political dimension, visible in regimes of surveillance and platform governance that regulate participation and visibility [37]. Second, a posthuman dimension, in which subjectivity emerges as distributed and technologically mediated rather than autonomous. Third, a material dimension grounded in infrastructural dependency and technological precarity. Fourth, an ecological dimension, which foregrounds the environmental entanglements of digital infrastructures and the interdependence between technological systems and material conditions of life. And finally, an aesthetic-ethical dimension articulated through the figure of the vulnerable hero, whose exposure and fragility are not narrative accidents but structural conditions of digital existence. Together, these dimensions clarify how fragile interfaces operate simultaneously as formal devices and as critical diagnoses of the contemporary platform society.

A primary point of convergence lies in the configuration of the digital text as a text interface [7]. In *Room #3*, the Zoom interface produces meaning through repetition, latency, and simulated presence, scripting subjectivity within platform constraints. In *Entre Ville*, the notebook and building façade organize perception spatially rather than sequentially, transforming domestic architecture into navigable text. In both cases, digital materiality is not an external support but an intrinsic dimension of literary form.

Yet the works diverge in how vulnerability becomes embodied. In *Room #3*, subjectivity appears fragmented and surveilled. The protagonist does not regain communicative control or restore narrative coherence. Instead, she remains suspended within technological mediation, exposed to visibility without reciprocity. In this sense, the work stages a contemporary version of the vulnerable hero as theorized by Onega and Ganteau: not a figure of mastery, but a subject marked by relational dependency and structural precarity [22]. By contrast, *Entre Ville* disperses vulnerability across an urban ecology. There is no singular heroic figure. Instead, domestic interiors, multispecies perception, and hypertextual fragments collectively enact exposure as a shared condition. Here, vulnerability emerges not as an individual fracture but as distributed relationality.

Through Butler’s account of vulnerability as constitutive openness [9], both works reveal that digital relationality intensifies exposure. In *Room #3*, hyperconnectivity culminates in surveillance; in *Entre Ville*, looking through digital windows implicates the reader in mediated intimacy. In each case, vulnerability is inseparable from technological mediation. It is not a weakness but a condition.

Formally, the works exemplify Ganteau’s concept of the vulnerable text [20]. Neither embraces linear progression nor narrative closure. Looping repetition in *Room #3* and hypertextual dispersion in *Entre Ville* resist totalization. Crucially, this formal openness is compounded by material precarity: hyperlinks may fail, platforms may disappear, interfaces may cease to function. Digital textuality thus exposes not only vulnerable subjects but vulnerable ontologies.

The concept of fragile interfaces allows these dynamics to be understood comparatively without collapsing their differences. Fragility operates across four interrelated dimensions: material (infrastructural dependency), structural (fragmentation and nonlinearity), affective (exposure and isolation), and political (surveillance and platform governance). Importantly, these interfaces reconfigure readerly agency. In Saum's work, the reader becomes implicated in digital oversight; in Carpenter's, the reader confronts the ethics of mediated observation. Reading becomes exposure.

From the perspective of Digital Humanities, electronic literature should therefore be approached not merely as technical innovation but as a critical site for interrogating the infrastructures that shape contemporary subjectivity. By foregrounding their dependence on platforms, browsers, and multimedia architectures, these works render visible the conditions of their own possibility. They challenge assumptions of textual stability inherited from print culture and reveal literary production as process, execution, and interaction. Electronic literature cannot be understood as a marginal supplement to print. It functions as a laboratory in which exposure, mediation, technological governance, and interdependence are staged aesthetically and materially. In these environments, fragility is not accidental but constitutive.

In relation to the research questions guiding this study, the analysis demonstrates, first, that digital interfaces in contemporary electronic literature structure vulnerability not only as thematic representation but as a formal and material condition embedded within interface-based environments. Second, it shows that platform logics and hypertextual architectures reshape literary subjectivity by producing fragmented, distributed, and technologically mediated forms of agency. Finally, it establishes that the concept of fragile interfaces provides a productive analytical framework for understanding how digital literary works expose the infrastructural, affective, political, and ecological dimensions of vulnerability within the platform society.

Ultimately, fragile interfaces name the convergence of relational vulnerability and technological mediation within digital literary environments. Through looping videoconferences and hypertextual urban cartographies, Room #3 and Entre Ville make perceptible the precarious infrastructures that sustain contemporary forms of connection. They reveal that in platform society, subjectivity is always already mediated, exposed, and dependent [38]. Electronic literature does not simply represent this condition but also performs it.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This research does not involve human participants, animal subjects, or sensitive personal data. The study is based exclusively on the analysis of publicly available literary and theoretical materials.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study. The research is based on textual analysis of publicly available digital literary works and published theoretical sources.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

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